

## **Snakes, Sacrifice and Sacrality in South Asian Religion**



**by Gabriel Jones**

***Let us honor the snakes on the earth along with those that are in the atmosphere and those that are in the heavens. Honor to those snakes!***

*Śatapatha Brahmana, 7.4.1.25-30<sup>1</sup>*

Rituals devoted to the propitiation and supplication of the *sarpa*, as the common snake is called in Sanskrit, as well as the snake's supernatural counterpart the *Naga*, have been in evidence on the Indian sub-continent for more than two millennia<sup>2</sup>. It has been suggested that snake veneration, within the vast corpus of fertility and ancestor cult practices<sup>3</sup> which permeated the South Asian pre-historic devotional landscape<sup>4</sup>, are the ritual seeds<sup>5</sup> from which medieval iconography and devotional practice evolved<sup>6</sup>. The snake figures prominently in the art<sup>7</sup> and narrative<sup>8</sup> of contemporary Saivism, Vaisnavism, Jainism<sup>9</sup> and Buddhism<sup>10</sup>, in addition to the many popular devotional practices of rural village<sup>11</sup> and



Figure 1 : Temple Nagini, Karnataka, 10th Century.

nomadic peoples<sup>12</sup> throughout India. In part to lingering colonial sentiment dogging the subject of popular religious practice, too often dismissed as primitive<sup>13</sup>, superstitious<sup>14</sup>, peasant<sup>15</sup> or folk<sup>16</sup> practices, serious academic examination of the impact of snake veneration on the religious landscape of India has been limited.

Building on Robert Redfield's notion that one can construct a valid characterization of pre- or proto-historic peoples through the combined efforts of archaeology and ethnography<sup>17</sup>, and Clifford Geertz's call for "thick description<sup>18</sup>" in the interpretation of culture, this paper looks to "thicken" the phenomena of snake sacrifice as a lived practice within distinct cultural theatres, integrated within textual and material referents of sacrifice to, and of, the snake. Furthermore,

this paper looks at how the many religious meaning(s) ascribed to snakes within a sacrificial context have been [re-] interpreted and implemented in those same theatres.

*...every serious cultural analysis starts at the beginning and ends where it manages to get...*

*Clifford Geertz<sup>19</sup>*

In taking this approach, I also set out to redirect certain assumptions persisting within South Asian scholarship, particularly from scholars engaged within orthodox traditions, on the nature and influence of “popular<sup>20</sup>” religious practices within more institutionalized, and thereby more visible (and more studied) traditions. Within these discourses it is implied that popular religions generally, and snake veneration specifically, are not subjects worthy of serious study<sup>21</sup>. It is my hope that this paper will address this criticism by surveying the influence and essential importance of snake veneration to contemporary devotional representation and practice.

I will therefore as Geertz suggests, “begin at the beginning”, which in this case is the cultural transition from pre- to proto-historic society, circa 900 BCE to 400 CE, which encompasses the pre-Kusana to Kusana periods in India’s material culture

history. This period pertains directly to two major religious innovations in which snake veneration are

historically implicated, and still prominently enacted. The first of these innovations was the implementation and formalization of a devotionally anchored representational canon, which cultural art historian D.M. Srinivasan argues as a bid to “concretize religious belief into the viable forms which Pan-India could recognize and accept as being fit for worship”<sup>22</sup>. This last is followed



Figure 2: Adhishesan, Varadharaja Perumai Temple, Chennai.

closely by a second innovation, the narrative re-evaluation of the snake, long an object of fear, awe and devotional activity. This paper juxtaposes the material and narrative referents from the Pre-Kusana (900 BCE to 400 BCE) and Kusana (400 BCE to 400 CE) periods<sup>23</sup> alongside the many contemporary South Asian expressions of snake sacrifice, encompassing accounts from Nepal and the Western Himalayas, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Kerala in particular.

### Snake worship: archaeological and textual considerations



Figure 3: Contemporary painting of Krisna destroying the demon serpent Kaliya ..

The contemporary religious traditions of India display a remarkable familiarity with snake worship<sup>24</sup>; from *Krsna's* legendary destruction of the many headed serpent *Kaliya*<sup>25</sup>, *Visnu* reclining against the cosmic serpent *Ananta*<sup>26</sup>, the Jina

Parsvanatha protected by the Rajanaga Dhanendra

and his queen Padmavati during his assault by the demon Kamatha, Buddha likewise was protected by the serpent *Muchalinda* which earned the Blessed One the moniker of *Mahanaga*<sup>27</sup>, or great snake.

These hagiographic referents, when considered alongside the continuing presence of devotional cults to deified Naga and Nagini<sup>28</sup>, as autonomous, affiliated or subaltern practices, demonstrate the prominence of the sacred snake as an object of ritual and religious authority in India.

As a prehistoric lived practice little is known with certainty

beyond what can be inferred from the available material

evidence, particularly with regards to religion in ancient pre-literate societies<sup>29</sup>. Ethnoarcheological

surveys of Palaeolithic sites across western and central India have unearthed a dearth of Harappan



Figure 4: Harappan terracotta painted bowl with serpent motifs, c. 1800 BCE.



Figure 5: Terracotta impression of a snake cult from a faience seal of Harappan attribution, c. 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE.

terracotta wares depicting the divine feminine<sup>30</sup> and the lingam, as well as water symbols, plants, and snakes<sup>31</sup>.

The prominence of snake imagery is by no means limited to potsherds<sup>32</sup>; several Harappan seals also provide compelling

evidence of prehistoric snake veneration<sup>33</sup>. The most commonly cited seal is the so-called proto-*Siva/Prashupati* figure crowned with what are variously interpreted as pipal leaves<sup>34</sup> or snake(s)<sup>35</sup>. A far less cited Harappan seal depicts kneeling devotees covered by rearing cobra-like snakes with hands raised to a yogic figure<sup>36</sup>. If we accept Raymond Allchin's claim that there is a "close connection in prehistoric societies between their beliefs concerning religion and ideology, and their artistic expression<sup>37</sup>", this last image provides the most compelling representation of a prehistoric snake cult in the Indus valley<sup>38</sup>.

Unfortunately, between these prehistoric material referents, and the earliest comparable proto-historic ones a thousand years later<sup>39</sup>, there is a significant gap in the material evidence. Allchin proposes a displacement hypothesis, whereby a combination of environmental and social stressors<sup>40</sup> upset the infrastructural balance of the Harappan culture<sup>41</sup> resulting in the peripheral dissolution and dispersement of Indus peoples<sup>42</sup> in successive waves of out-migration eastward from the Indus Valley, into the Gangetic Plains<sup>43</sup>. Doris Srinivasan also argues that the apparent artistic decline may also reflect an increased use of impermanent materials<sup>44</sup> such as wood, reed, dung, or even consumables over the stone and baked clay wares of the Indus period. In the absence of material evidence within this transitional phase, we must turn instead to textual referents. As there is no known indigenous literature from this period, we must look to the early Vedic redactors for evidence of devotion to the sacred snake<sup>45</sup>. The *Rg Veda* records the very earliest textual mention of snake worship in its description of the world-serpent *Vrtra*<sup>46</sup>, meaning 'storm-cloud', demonic opponent to the Vedic hero Indra.

Vritra, the Dasyu, literally a robber, but apparently used in contrast to *Arya*, as if intending the uncivilized tribes of India. 'Thou, singly assailing him, although with auxiliaries at hand/ Perceiving the impending manifold destructiveness of [Indra's] bow/ they, the *Sanakas* [followers of Vritra], the *neglecters of sacrifice*, fled.<sup>47</sup>'

The characterization of *Vritra* as the “concealer<sup>48</sup>” of the sun, the bringer of night, as an indigenous object of veneration, as well as of a culture that “neglected” to sacrifice, alludes to the dramatic axiological difference between Vedic and non-Vedic peoples. In the *Rg Veda*, *Vritra* is cast as “the obstructor of heaven and earth<sup>49</sup>”, that which prevented the celestial waters from falling. Indra, in striking off the head of *Vritra*, is, from the Vedic perspective, liberating the Vedic peoples from the worldly hegemony that the indigenous worship of the celestial snake represented.

The Bhagavata and Vishnu Puranas allude to the cosmic snake Ananta being both the source and



Figure 6: Ananta supporting and protecting Visnu in his eternal sleep. Tamilnadu, c. 14th century.

physical support of all creation<sup>50</sup>. Ananta, meaning “endless<sup>51</sup>” is also called Śesa or Adishesha, the first snake<sup>52</sup>. Ananta is described as a primal creative being in whose hoods are held all the planets of the universe<sup>53</sup>, and whose endless coiling

maintains the order of the universe<sup>54</sup>. The

Matsya Purana tells that when “all creatures are consumed by fire at the end of the Yuga [current era], Śesa alone will remain<sup>55</sup>”.

While Ananta is associated with Visnu<sup>56</sup>, Vasuki the serpent king is associated with Siva, depicted slung around Siva's neck<sup>57</sup> as a warning and a blessing. Vasuki, in contrast to Ananta, is much more involved in the worldly affairs of gods and men. He is commonly invoked in the laying the foundation of a new



house to ensure the security of the household. The *samudra manthan*, the churning of the primordial ocean of milk, in which Vasuki's body, held on one side by Gods and on the other by Demons, is used to rotate Mount Mandaranchal in a churning motion so that the ocean would release its divine gems.

During the process of pulling at Vasuki's body, however, he expels the *hlaa-hul*, the most vicious and deadly poison in existence that immediately consumes the attendant deities and demons until Siva swallows it, turning his throat blue<sup>58</sup>, which is why Siva is known and depicted as "blue-throated".

Ananta, Śesa and Vasuki are understood as the first serpents, and bringers of rains and fertility when appeased, and earthquakes, death, and destruction when angered. Vrtra, Ananta, Śesa and Vasuki were essentially revered in an effort to placate, what was understood as an untamed, and untameable, supernatural agent of the cosmos in animal form.

Initially tolerated<sup>59</sup> by Vedists, which cultural historians link to the Aryan shift from open warfare with resident peoples which had been effective in the context of fortified enclaves<sup>60</sup>, to having to engage with scattered forest dwelling villagers<sup>61</sup>.

Despite compelling evidence that the South Asian sub-continent was populated by a great many tribal collectives<sup>62</sup>, the Vedas maintain a distinct unity in their opposition to the *Dasyus*, the primary worshippers of the snake, the goddess and the lingam<sup>63</sup>. This resulted in some accommodation of the sacred snake as a locus of power<sup>64</sup> which was inevitably subjugated to Vedic authority<sup>65</sup> and control.

By the time of the Aranyakas, the practice of snake worship was being openly vilified by the Brahmanic elite<sup>66</sup>, perhaps in a bid to



Figure 7: Yaksha and Yakshini with Jina overhead, Madhya Pradesh. 11th century.

wrest control over wealthy patrons of religion who were increasingly influential in the growing urban polity. Northern and Central India by the Pre-Kusana period had fallen under control of foreign invaders from Bactria and modern day north-western Yunnan<sup>67</sup>, who in a bid to stabilize newly formed states were inclined towards a multivalent religious tolerance<sup>68</sup>. This freedom of worship becomes evident in the artistic innovations<sup>69</sup> discovered in Pre-Kusana sites, particularly around the Mathura area<sup>70</sup>, which depict cultic figures such as Yakshas and Yakshis<sup>71</sup>, Nagas and Naginis<sup>72</sup> alongside prominent political, religious and mythological characters.

### **Yakshas and Nagas**

Yakshas and their female counterparts Yakshinis are inherently ambiguous figures with distinctly numinous character. Perhaps best explained as manifestations of elemental uncertainty, the Yaksha in a devotional context, function as embodied agents of the natural and the wild; comparable perhaps to the *djinn* of Arabia or the *pari* of the trans-Himalaya<sup>73</sup>. In India the yaksha is “a primeval symbol of fertility, abundance, water, and vegetation<sup>74</sup>” frequently represented aniconically, as demonstrated by the ongoing practice of keeping sacred trees, groves<sup>75</sup>, water pools<sup>76</sup> or other naturally occurring features<sup>77</sup> as incarnations of fertility or elemental sacred power. The textual tradition underscores how the popular understanding of the Yaksha has changed, from a beneficial figure which was the uncontested object of devotion<sup>78</sup>, to a “terrifying, demonic creature<sup>79</sup>” that must be subjugated and subordinated to more human agents of spiritual power<sup>80</sup>.





Figure 8: The miracle of Nagaraja protecting Parsvanatha in the deluge, and flanked by attendant yaksha-nagas Dhanendra and Padmavati in anthropomorphic and theriomorphic representations. Ranakpur, 14th to 15th centuries.

The Nagas fall into this scheme as tutelary inhabitants of these same sacred spaces<sup>81</sup>, who by virtue of their physical, affective and numinous presence<sup>82</sup>, are understood as natural or supernatural agents of environmental affordance<sup>83</sup>.

As the devotional demand to represent visually<sup>84</sup> the Yaksha and Naga, following the transition from rural to urban devotion of these deities, they increasingly took on the familiar anthropomorphic and theriomorphic forms pre-eminent throughout the proto-historic period. Still popular to this day, they are understood as embodied manifestations of the deity. Significantly, however, the Yaksha and Naga murti, whether in isolation or affiliated with an ancestor/hero or greater deity<sup>85</sup> as a *kshetrapa*<sup>86</sup> -- a deified guardian of an inhabited farm or field -- in narrative or art, is always thought of as integral to the world, and immanently accessible, albeit in solitary form, subject to whim and affiliatory uncertainty.

It is this moral ambiguity, so intriguing to scholar and devotee alike, as much as the essential nature of their (potential) boons of healthy crops and children<sup>87</sup>, which have kept the Yaksha and Naga in the collective imagination of the people for centuries, and of women particularly<sup>88</sup>.

Already by the pre-Kusana period, the Yaksha and Yaksha-Nag were ancient objects of worship<sup>89</sup>, grounded in rural or village fertility beliefs<sup>90</sup>. That their use in ritual settings shifted from large figures in public or temple settings, to small figures in predominantly domestic settings,<sup>91</sup> is indicative not of a decline in practice, as is often stated, so much as a reflection of orthodox Brahmin sentiment increasingly influencing the urban polity<sup>92</sup>. Even then, the Yaksha and Naga were increasingly being adopted as the devotional standard from which the religious characterizations<sup>93</sup> of late Vedic orthodox and heterodox religious figures were derived, such as Siva and Vishnu in the former, Parsvanatha and later the Buddha in the latter<sup>94</sup>.

This representational consolidation of the peasant<sup>95</sup> and elite traditions, are linked to conscious attempts on the part of the urban elite to assimilate or convert the indigenous populations<sup>96</sup>. These “peasant” populations were an increasingly important demographic in the struggle for spiritual authority<sup>97</sup> as the early *Janapadas* came into being.

*Janapadas* were consolidated fiefdoms, thought to originally derive from clan or tribal territories that became important artistic<sup>98</sup>, religious and political centers. From this point we witness a large scale increase in the production and distribution of hybridized<sup>99</sup> Yaksha and Naga-images<sup>100</sup> between the various art and artisanal

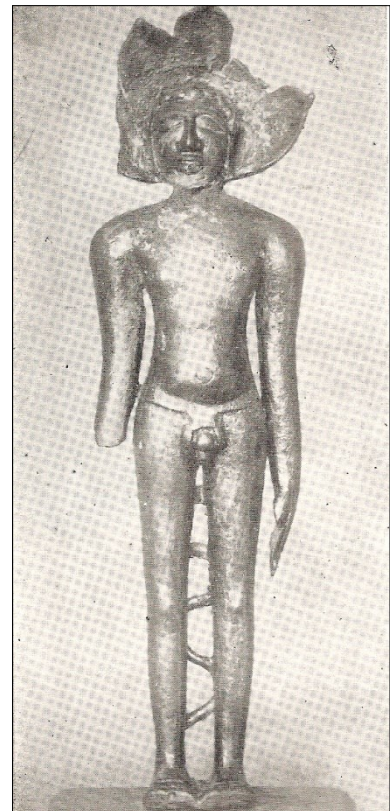


Figure 9: Bronze Parsvanatha, c. 1st century BCE.

loci<sup>101</sup>, focussed largely around Mathura<sup>102</sup>, the Deccan, and to a lesser extent the Gandharan region<sup>103</sup>, well into the early centuries CE<sup>104</sup>.

The period of 200 BCE to 300 CE was a rare time of religious equipoise<sup>105</sup> for Yaksha and Naga worship in the history of South Asian religions. In Northern India, by the Gupta period (300 CE-600 CE) both Yaksha and Naga had become largely “displaced as major focuses of worship in the urban public domain by the deities [later] associated with Puranic Hinduism<sup>106</sup>”. Today, these are more frequently practiced in rural, marginal or nomadic communities of the western Himalaya and Northern India. In the South these practices continued well into the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, and prospered in revitalized form throughout the medieval period. Naga worship in its many forms is particularly vibrant in Gujarat<sup>107</sup>, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala<sup>108</sup>, Orissa, and West Bengal<sup>109</sup>.

## Nagas as paradigms of sacred immanence



Figure 10: King Cobra, India.

India ecologically favours the proliferation of snakes, with over 120 distinct species so far catalogued on the sub-continent<sup>110</sup>. Snakes, and particularly the cobra, are understood as death dealers<sup>111</sup> which, in the choice ecological habitat provided by the predominantly sub-tropical and tropical climate of the Indian sub-continent, enable a diverse range of

habitats. Indian snakes can be found in trees, burrowed in the earth as well as in, and around, all bodies of water<sup>112</sup>. They are functionally everywhere. It is only their inherently secretive nature<sup>113</sup> coupled with government subsidized snake-catching<sup>114</sup> that prevents contemporary India from being completely overrun by snakes, as undoubtedly has been the sentiment in ages past. Their characterization as inhabitants and symbolic guardians of the trees, in particular fig-trees<sup>115</sup>, their association with the waters fed by monsoon rains<sup>116</sup>, and finally their extreme prolificacy<sup>117</sup> (cobras can give birth to hundreds of young) connects the snake with fertility<sup>118</sup>. It has additionally often been suggested that the regular shedding of old skin is a visual metaphor for renewal and rebirth<sup>119</sup>, which, when combined with their latent ability to kill, makes the snake an obvious embodied materialization of the life cycle, and of immortality. Given the immediate danger that the snake poses, particularly to small children and to the elderly (who are most susceptible to the venom of cobras and vipers) combined with the association with fertility, it is not surprising that a central preoccupation of devotees to the Naga, are propitiatory requests for progeny, health and healing illness and snakebite<sup>120</sup> --

The knowledge of poisons or antidotes is one of the eight chief subjects of India medical science: 'Innumerable are the famous Lords of the Nagas (holy cobras) headed by Vasuki and beginning from Takshaka, earth bearers, resembling the sacrificial fire in their

splendour (teja), who incessantly cause thunder, rain and heat and by whom this earth with her oceans, mountains and continents is supported and who in their wrath might smite the whole world with their breath and sight. Homage be to those. With those there is no need of the healing art. But of those of the poison fangs that belong to the earth and bite human beings I will enumerate the number and in the proper order.<sup>121'</sup>

The Artharvaveda alludes that the knowledge of medicinal herbs used in healing and countering poisons rest with the snakes themselves<sup>122</sup>, a power later assumed by ascetics<sup>123</sup> as they systematically supplanted the sacred snake<sup>124</sup> as accessible embodiments of sacred presence. Nonetheless, the tradition as a whole persists, in large part due to its fundamentally affect-laden ground which is universally accessible, but also because the multiethnic communities newly consolidated together as part of the growing urban polis encouraged the incorporation of the old beliefs with the new. The Bhavishya Purana, for example, exhorts men to bathe the snakes called Vasuki, Takshaka, Kaliya, Manibhadra, Airavata, Dhritarashtra, Karkotaka and Dhananjaya with milk on the fifth day of the bright fortnight of Shravan to ensure “freedom from danger for their families<sup>125</sup>”.





Figure 12: Anointing a Naga with milk.

Temples dedicated to Nagas, such as the Jahar Pir Mandir in Rajasthan dedicated to Gugga<sup>126</sup>, or the Mannarasala Temple in Kerala, offer milk, butter, turmeric or rice powder<sup>127</sup> as part of daily *pūja* to the serpent deities. For women desiring children, a bell-metal vessel is offered<sup>128</sup>. These offerings are explicitly understood as propitiatory gifts chosen for their capacity to please or appease the Naga. The ritual performance of a *sarpa pattu*, or serpent song, by caste specialists<sup>129</sup> during major festivals and by special request by a patron, is also performed to “assuage the wrath of the snake god<sup>130</sup>” and ensure good fortune in the coming year. This last is a distinctly south Indian



Figure 11: The *sarpa kalam*, a ritual mandala dedicated to the sacred snake. Mannarasala Temple, Kerala. c. 1945.

elaboration on snake sacrifice, in that the song is



both a propitiatory offering and a devotional gesture. Related to the *sarpam pattu* is the *Pampin hullal*, a ritual dance dedicated to the snake gods. Ordinary rice flour mixed with lime and turmeric powder and burnt paddy husk are employed, in all shades of red, white, black and ochre<sup>131</sup> to draw elaborately entwined snake figures on the ground. They are flanked by lamps and food offerings<sup>132</sup> such as milk, butter, and turmeric or rice powder<sup>133</sup>. This type of ritual drawing is known as *kalam*, and is circumambulated by devotees, accompanied by prayers and music<sup>134</sup>.

Following the construction of the *kalam*, designated women, usually unmarried virgin women<sup>135</sup> of the sponsoring household, form a procession that, led by a *pujari* of high caste<sup>136</sup>, circumambulates three times around the *kalam*, dancing and whirling in emulation of the movement of the snakes, touching the *kalam*, and their foreheads, in orchestration with the music and recitation of mantras. This ecstatic dance culminates in the recitation of prayers at the *kavu*<sup>137</sup> which is a “sacred spot set aside as the abode of the snake deity<sup>138</sup>”. The most notable feature of the *Pampin hullal* is that the young women, “chosen to represent the power of the serpent<sup>139</sup>” following a period of abstinence<sup>140</sup>, will, as part of the circumambulatory dance, fall into trance states, said to be possession by the deity<sup>141</sup>, and utter sounds or words believed to be the “words of the [snake] god<sup>142</sup>”. At the close of the ritual, the women, still believed to be possessed by the deity, wipe the *kalam* completely away with “fierce brushing of their hair<sup>143</sup>”.

That snakes are believed to be keepers of hidden knowledge, a theme that reoccurs frequently in hagiographic literature and poetry, is demonstrated in these ecstatic rites by the practice of pressing the possessed women with questions, suggesting that these possessions serve oracular purposes<sup>144</sup>. This potential is not limited to any one Naga spirit; rather, the proceedings are typically dedicated to one or several of nine Nagas<sup>145</sup>: Nagaraja (directly identified with Dhanendra<sup>146</sup> for Jains), Sarpa Yakshi, Naga Yakshi, Naga Chamundi, Nilavara Muthassan, Kuzhi nagam, Kari Nagam, Mani Nagam and Para Nagam,

who are seen as the leaders of the otherworldly serpent realms. These are but a few of the aspects that have come to form contemporary *sarpabali*, the literal strengthening or empowering of the snake gods.

### Sacrifice and the snake

If the previous accounts tell us anything, it is that sacrifice, as constituted within snake veneration, is not uniformly interpreted or applied. The antiquity and cross-cultural breadth of snake worship has produced performative variations which, in their complexity, make analyzing sacrifice problematic. This is most aptly demonstrated in the ambiguity attached to contemporary *sarpabali*, the performative “catch-all” incorporating classical Vedic, as well as regional, interpretations of snake sacrifice. *Sarpabali* may be variously performed as “a sacrifice to serpents, a sacrifice by serpents [or] a sacrifice consisting



Figure 13: Women making propitiatory offerings to live snakes during Nag Panchami.

of serpents<sup>147</sup>”. I would suggest that this performative ambiguity relates directly to the processual stages of inclusion, accommodation, incorporation and assimilation that derive from the ongoing struggle for cultural equipoise within competing ethnospheres, which we can access through the examination of available ethnographic, textual and material referents.

The first of these sacrificial nuances, the “sacrifice to snakes” is by far the most widespread and resilient of the sacrificial practices discussed throughout this paper. As we have seen, the abodes and haunts of the snake are often *caityas*, sites of sacred importance which are maintained in their natural state, or developed as *tirths*, enclaves with shrines and temples. Within these spaces anyone, regardless of caste, may



Figure 14: Feeding milk to live snakes during Nag Panchami.

pay homage in prayer, and through food offerings, to either a live snake, a representation of a snake, or, in more developed settings, a snake deity. This accessibility, described as “grass-roots devotion”, goes far in explaining the pervasiveness of this practice.

It is traditionally believed that snakes like milk (itself the sacred by-product of the cow, another sacred animal), and bowls of milk<sup>148</sup> are frequently seen placed before anthills, pools and groves where snakes are known to live. To see a snake drink from such an offering bowl is believed to be extremely auspicious<sup>149</sup>, an indication that any prayer made by the witness would be granted. In addition to milk, raw or broken eggs are occasionally offered, as well as turmeric, rice flour<sup>150</sup>, and clarified butter<sup>151</sup>. Such is the belief in the power of propitiatory offerings to the snake, that during *Nag Panchami*, the pan-Indian festival dedicated to Nagas and snakes of all kinds, in which the enthusiastic feeding of live snakes, typically caught especially for the holy festival, frequently results in the death of the snakes from indigestion or asphyxiation<sup>152</sup>. This fact, greatly criticized by animal welfare activists and śramanic devotees as cruel, has occasioned the Indian government to ban<sup>153</sup> the use of live specimens in favour of state supplied brass idols<sup>154</sup>. Even with this proscription, many continue to travel outside the country to participate in traditional sacrifices with live animals<sup>155</sup>, in what is still thought of as an extremely potent practice<sup>156</sup>.

Outside of disagreements as to what constitutes an appropriate offering to the sacred snake, the sacrificial practice as a whole is fairly consistent throughout India, and as any *bhakta* will tell you, is not exclusive to snake worship. Feeding the deity is an ancient<sup>157</sup> practice, likely derived from ancestral veneration rites of feeding ancestors<sup>158</sup>. Naga deities are also implicated in this form of veneration, as in the case of the Nagbansi Rajputs of Jharkhand, the Bais Rajputs of Uttar Pradesh, the Meitheis of Bangladesh, and the Mirasis of North India and Pakistan, who all claim descent from Nagas<sup>159</sup>. Interestingly, there is a great deal of debate amongst devotees surrounding the question of whether

offerings aim to pacify snakes and Nagas that are understood, as implicitly aggressive, tormenting the native<sup>160</sup> physically or spiritually, as is how it is described in much of the Western Himalayas<sup>161</sup>, or, rather that the offerings are in effect gifts exchanged for the valued commodity of preternatural blessings or protections, as Westermarck's theory of sacrifice postulates<sup>162</sup>.

The textual sacred snake within orthodox Hinduism has presented an exegetical scenario of inclusion to accommodation through contextual reconfiguration<sup>163</sup>. From the earliest texts, the cultural collision and conflict between explicitly non-Vedic snake worshippers and Vedic Brahmin reveals an axiological divide centered on the source and nature of all earthly power. Beginning in the Rg Veda, redactors build a case for the sacred snake as a primordially non-human other, but more importantly, a non-sacrificial and therefore fundamentally non-religious other<sup>164</sup>. In contrast, late Vedic texts portray snake worship in more intimate and proximal terms. Theirs is the narrative of close neighbours trying to get along for mutual benefit<sup>165</sup>, of mutual inclusion. This inclusion correlates to the textual tradition of hybrid categories, liminal figures who act as intercessors between two (or more) otherwise incompatible groups. Consider the following passage from the *Śatapatha Brahmana*:

[A long haired person] is neither a woman nor a man since he is long haired. Since he is a man, he cannot be a woman, since he is long haired, he cannot be a man. And this red metal is neither iron nor gold, and these biting ones are neither worms nor non-worms. Red metal is used because these biting things are reddish. This is the reason you put [red metal] in the mouth of a long haired man [to ward off snakes]<sup>166</sup>

Given this passage's explicit categorization of the snake as a hybrid creature, the use of similarly hybrid agents as a magical prophylactic<sup>167</sup> demonstrates a discomfort with the snake as a naturally embodied liminal figure, so conceived for the affective and proximal reasons with regards to its veneration, and cultural with regards to sacrifice. From this conceptual position, it is a short step to reconfiguring the sacred snake in purely Brahmanic terms, which is recorded in the Vedic *sarpanama*, one of the rare snake-focussed Vedic rituals<sup>168</sup>, which provides us with the second of the interpretations of snake sacrifice, the "sacrifice by the snake"<sup>169</sup>. The *sarpanama*, or snake-name mantras, are performed

*exclusively by Brahmin and for Brahmin*<sup>170</sup> represented as Nagas, or Naga disciples, during sacrifices<sup>171</sup> to invoke the power or influence of the chthonic and elemental realms long associated with the sacred snake:

Let us honor the snakes on the earth along with those that are in the atmosphere and those that are in the heavens. Honor to those snakes! /To those snakes who are the arrows of demons...to those snakes who are in the trees or who lie in holes – honor to those snakes! / To those snakes who are in the shining sky, or those who are in the water. Honor to those snakes!<sup>172</sup>

This passage, the first recorded association of sacrifice within snake veneration, is clearly an attempt by Brahmins to control the sacred snake through application of the Vedic mantra, the *sarpa* subordinated by sacred utterance, the heart of Vedic belief. This clearly demonstrates that by the pre-Kusana/late Vedic era, in which the greatest concentrations of narrative and iconographic hybridizations, the sacred snake was undergoing a process of domestication by Brahmanic and Śramanic redactors<sup>173</sup> as it presented a presence “antithetical to the establishment of exclusive control over the natural world”<sup>174</sup> which was, and still is, the primary concern of the lay devotees<sup>175</sup>. This form of sacrifice, which Coomarswamy argues is a morphological and processual predecessor to bhakti<sup>176</sup>, particularly in contemporary India, where blood sacrifice is forbidden by law.

Imperative to understanding the resilience of the sacred snake, even in the face of these processes, is the core belief that immanent power is a transferrable commodity<sup>177</sup>, from greater to lesser, through devotional engagement.

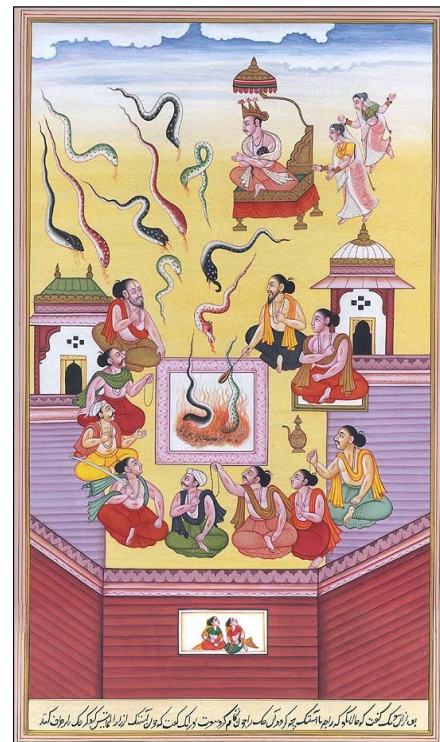


Figure 15: Medieval painting depicting King Janamejaya's epic sarpasattra as told in the Adi Parvan.

The basic rule is that any being that a person considers more powerful than himself or herself in any particular realm of life can become an object of worship... [and] any action ... undertaken because of another being's power is religious action<sup>178</sup>.

That religious action can also be a sacrificial one allows for the last of the interpretations of snake sacrifice, the “sacrifice *of* snakes<sup>179</sup>”.

The *sarpasattra*, like the *sarpanama*, is a ritual action intended originally to be performed exclusively by priests<sup>180</sup>, suggesting that snake veneration was useful to the consolidation of priestly authority and influence. *Sarpasattra* literally means snake sacrifice, however in its original intention it denoted sacrifice performed “by snakes” embodied as Brahmins<sup>181</sup>, for the “*sattra* is above all a ritual by and for the Brahmin officiate, who collectively accrue the benefits of their own endeavour<sup>182</sup>”. Evidence of grass-roots intervention on this Brahmin appropriation of previously open practices, suggests a tension between Brahmin ritualists and the snake worshipping populace at large. By the time of the redaction of the *Adi Parvan* portion of the *Mahabharata*, dated no earlier than the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, a great deal of effort was being exerted to undermine the sacrality of the snake<sup>183</sup>. The scriptural relationship between the sacred snake and sacrifice wanes, culminating in the epic of King Janamejaya's *sarpasattra*, arguably the most dramatic snake sacrifice ever described. Within this narrative, the *sarpasattra* is no longer depicted as a sacrifice by serpents but rather *of* serpents, a first in the literary history of India.

Undertaken at Kurukshetra, the notable site of human holocaust which frames the Bhagavad Gita, King Janamejaya, Arjuna's great-grandson, avenging the death/murder of his father (or in some versions his son) by the Naga prince *Taksaka*<sup>184</sup>, creates a massive *hotr*, or sacrificial fire into which all the snakes of the world, natural or supernatural, would be drawn into and immolated – a veritable genocide of serpent-kind. Notably, it is this event that sets the stage for the telling of the Mahabharata epic. In the end, this serpent holocaust is only just averted by Astika, a hybrid Brahmin-Naga who quells Janamejaya's wrath.



The practice of immolating snakes was, and is, still practiced throughout greater South Asia<sup>185</sup> despite it being officially banned in India<sup>186</sup>. In Kathmandu, as part of a *panchbali* or “five animal sacrifice”, two snakes are frequently rendered to the flames, with the understanding that they have ritually assented to the sacrifice<sup>187</sup>, as part of ritual acts of propitiation to the mountain goddess Indrayani. The relationship between blood sacrifice, veneration to the goddess and Naga worship is also evident in the lower western Himalayan region, where Naga are believed to be “fundamentally demonic and vengeful<sup>188</sup>” and under the tutelage of equally wrathful goddesses. There, to keep the Naga Devta peaceful<sup>189</sup>, animal and (anecdotally) human sacrifices are performed<sup>190</sup>, although with strict conditions grounded in locale --

“...the Naga gods have always been very selective about the choice of sacrificial victims. Those Naga deities, who controlled the underground sources of water, could only be appeased by offering them women, usually having suckling child. .. Another class of Naga gods mostly confined to the interiors of the region...demanded only the able-bodied young men in sacrifice...” where others were satisfied by any human. Still others accepted only male goats or in some cases milk<sup>191</sup>.



Figure 16: Captive cobra, worshipped as a living incarnation of the Devta Naga.

These mountain Nagas, characterized as capricious, wrathful gods, are comparable to the *pari*, mountain spirits of the Hindu Kush Hunza valley, also similarly propitiated by blood sacrifices<sup>192</sup>. Close examination of blood sacrifice to the Naga reveal that there is a notable preponderance of wrathful Nagini in environmentally sensitive or hazardous areas<sup>193</sup> that typically function as lineage deities. This suggests a conflation of highland pastoralist animism<sup>194</sup>, *kuldevi* veneration<sup>195</sup>, and lowland agricultural Naga veneration<sup>196</sup>.

I would suggest that the association of blood sacrifice with wrathful or highly dangerous deities, in these equally dangerous environments, are an upward valuation of the offering over the potential

risk posed by an environment which is seen as potentially hostile. The great number of taboos attached to agricultural practices and water use in highland valley and terrace environments<sup>197</sup> lend support to this idea of sacrifice as measured against regional risks and affordances.

### Final thoughts

This paper has demonstrated that ritual sacrifice within the broad practice of snake veneration is not uniformly expressed. The antiquity and cross-cultural breadth of snake worship has produced ritual and performative variations, touched briefly upon here within the context of India and the greater Western Himalayas. The multi-faceted picture that emerges makes theorizing sacrifice within the broader practice potentially problematic. However, by ethnographically contextualizing Hoek and Shrestra's formulation of snake sacrifice as a tri-partite structure, of sacrifice *to* snakes, *by* snakes, and *of* snakes, we gain valuable insight into what otherwise would be an unwieldy and unmanageable subject, which has often been a source of criticism in the study of Indian popular religion.

By contextualizing the influence of external religious/political bodies in diminishing or appropriating the devotional impact of the sacred snake, we were able to isolate multiple strands of snake sacrifice which are given greater or lesser prominence within different ethnospheres<sup>198</sup>. The unifying thread for all three of these practices is the snake itself, a paradigmatic object of fear and awe, death and immortality.



Figure 17: Contemporary Parsvanatha, Delhi.

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- <sup>164</sup> A. Pike, pp. 627.
- <sup>165</sup> Cozad, pp. 25.
- <sup>166</sup> Cozad, pp. 32.
- <sup>167</sup> Carter, pp. 76-77.
- <sup>168</sup> Cozad, pp. 28.
- <sup>169</sup> Hoek and Shetha, pp. 60.
- <sup>170</sup> Cozad, pp. 36.
- <sup>171</sup> Cozad, pp. 28.
- <sup>172</sup> Cozad, pp. 29.
- <sup>173</sup> Cozad, pp. 20.
- <sup>174</sup> Cozad, pp. 20.
- <sup>175</sup> P.S. Jaini, *Collected Papers on Jaina Studies*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2000. Pp. 187-188.
- <sup>176</sup> Coomarswamy, *Yakshas*, pp.28.
- <sup>177</sup> Cozad, pp. 31.
- <sup>178</sup> Cozad, pp. 31.
- <sup>179</sup> Hoek and Shetha, pp. 60.
- <sup>180</sup> Cozad, pp. 36.
- <sup>181</sup> Cozad, pp. 36.
- <sup>182</sup> Cozad, pp. 37.
- <sup>183</sup> Cozad, pp. 52.
- <sup>184</sup> Hoek and Shetha, pp. 62.



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<sup>185</sup> M. Bradley, personal communication, email received November 27, 2009. Consider:

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/8375591.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8375591.stm)

<sup>186</sup> M. Bradley, personal communication, email received November 27, 2009.

<sup>187</sup> Hoek and Shetha, pp. 58.

<sup>188</sup> Handa, pp. 10.

<sup>189</sup> Handa, pp. 9.

<sup>190</sup> Handa, pp. 10.

<sup>191</sup> Handa, pp. 10.

<sup>192</sup> M. H. Sidke, *Shamans and Mountain Spirits in Hunza*, Asian Folklore Studies, Volume 53, 1994. Pp. 72-73.

<sup>193</sup> Handa, O.C. pp. 108

<sup>194</sup> Jones, G. *People(s) of the Sacred Mountains: making a case for high-peak religious culture along the trans-Himalayas*. Panel contribution for 'Religion in India and Pakistan'; Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, Carleton University, Ottawa, CANADA. May 2009.

<sup>195</sup> Handa, O.C. pp. 95; Jones, G. *Kuldevi Worship as a Subaltern Cultural Tradition for Jaina Women*, Paper presented for panel on "Personal Encounters of the Goddess" at the 2008 Gaia Gathering, UOttawa, May 2008.

<sup>196</sup> Handa, O.C. pp. 81.

<sup>197</sup> Jones, G. *People(s) of the Sacred Mountains: making a case for high-peak religious culture along the trans-Himalayas*. Panel contribution for 'Religion in India and Pakistan'; Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, Carleton University, Ottawa, CANADA. May 2009.

<sup>198</sup> Davis, *Light at the Edge of the World*, pp. 5.